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BOARD OF
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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

The Crisis in Soviet-Czechoslovak Relations

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10 May 1968
No. 10-68

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

10 May 1968

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 10-68

SUBJECT: The Crisis in Soviet-Czechoslovak Relations*

SUMMARY

During the last week or so Soviet concern over developments in Czechoslovakia has clearly been increasing at a rapid rate. We believe that the Soviets have issued a serious warning to Prague to arrest its wayward course, and that, if this proves ineffective, Moscow intends to use additional sanctions. The best judgment that can be made at this stage is that the Soviets will probably stop short of military intervention. But the stakes for the Soviet leaders are high, and such a move can no longer be excluded.

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* This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence.

GROUP 1
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1. The Soviet leadership, after several months of fretting, fuming, and temporizing, seems now to have decided that heavy pressures will be needed to push the alarmingly wayward Czechs back into line. Signs of this from Moscow, Prague, and elsewhere have begun to accumulate at a startling rate. In the last day or two there has been evidence of some Soviet troop movements in Poland and East Germany toward Czechoslovak frontiers. Chances of at least an open political clash of some sort between the two countries, or of an open clash between contending forces within Czechoslovakia, or of both, thus seem to be increasing, and rapidly so.

The Moscow Meetings

2. Precisely what took place during Alexander Dubcek's hurried trip to Moscow last weekend remains a mystery. A Czech source's description of the meetings as "rough", however, seems plausible. The Soviet leaders, who were inclined initially to view post-Novotny political developments in Czechoslovakia as "revisionist", are said to see them now -- as did Ulbricht from the very beginning -- as "counterrevolutionary." (A similar change in Soviet terminology took place in October 1956 vis-a-vis Hungary.) The subsequent quick convocation in Moscow of the four Eastern

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European leaders who presumably share Soviet concern -- Ulbricht, Gomulka, Kadar, and Zhivkov -- tends to substantiate the notion that the Soviets talked tough to the Czechs. These leaders were probably informed of what Brezhnev told Dubcek, what Dubcek had to say for himself, and what the Soviets planned to do about Czechoslovakia if Dubcek were not in a concessionary mood or if, regardless of Dubcek's mood, Czechoslovakia continued to move away from both Communism and the USSR.

3. Several other developments since Dubcek's visit to Moscow also suggest that the Soviets arrived at some hard decision last weekend. Dubcek himself, on his return to Prague, was reticent but did confess to the press that the Soviets were anxious about the Czech situation, an admission subsequently quoted, and thus confirmed, by Pravda. Dubcek also revealed that economic proposals advanced by the Czechs -- probably asking for more equitable trade relations and for a hard-currency loan -- would only be "studied" by the Soviets. Finally, Dubcek took account of the USSR's growing inclination to brandish the Warsaw Pact by asserting that (presumably contrary to Moscow suspicions) Prague was still a loyal and participating Pact member.

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4. Dubcek had hardly finished speaking before Tass issued a stern and, in effect, official demand that the Czech press, including the party press, end its campaign to implicate the USSR in the death of Jan Masaryk (a demand which has since been explicitly and vehemently rejected by at least one Prague paper). Next, Tass was promptly gone one better by Tribuna Ludu, voice of the Polish party, which on 8 May came out and frankly declared itself in favor of the forcible silencing by the leadership in Prague of those responsible for the "alien, anti-socialist trend" in Czechoslovakia. Chances are that Tribuna Ludu was speaking for Moscow. If so, the Soviets have now warned in effect that the Czech party will have to assert itself and regain control of the press and, indeed, of the country as a whole, or else face some very serious consequences.

5. The Soviet leaders are clearly concerned that events may be getting out of hand in Czechoslovakia and, from their perspective, they may be right. Even though they are probably not persuaded that a capitalist restoration is imminent, they can only be bewildered, pained, and frightened by the outpourings of an unfettered press, the public clamor for a revival of Czech

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democracy, and the opening up of sensitive issues buried long ago by Soviet stooges in Prague. More important perhaps, they can only be alarmed by the spectacle of a Communist Party in the hands of people unable or even unwilling to do anything about all this. They must also be well aware that the future of those Czechoslovak Communists most likely to try to reimpose pro-Soviet orthodoxy is now in grave doubt; pressures for the convocation of a Czechoslovak Party Congress in the near term seem to have become almost irresistable, and such a Congress would almost certainly remove Novotny holdovers from positions of authority. Small wonder, then, that the Soviets may have issued an ultimatum to Dubcek in Moscow. But even if they did, three big questions remain: (1) How did Dubcek respond? (2) What threats did the Soviets make? and (3) What measures are the Soviets actually prepared to use against Czechoslovakia?

The Dubcek Dilemma

6. Alexander Dubcek is very much the man in the middle. Appeasing the Soviets risks serious domestic repercussions; appeasing the home folks risks serious Soviet countermeasures. Perhaps he can somehow maneuver between extremes -- a tactic he

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has practiced with some success within the Czech party -- and avoid a final choice. A display of Soviet impatience might even help Dubcek if he is of a mind to persuade the liberals to calm down, which he probably is. Statements by him since the Moscow meeting, and even by the leading liberal, Smrkovsky, seem to point in this direction. Ultimately, however, Dubcek might be forced to choose: to follow, perhaps, the dictates of his conscience and his patriotism, the route taken by Imre Nagy; or to go the way of expediency and "socialist internationalism", the path descended by Janos Kadar.

7. Brezhnev is said recently to have praised Dubcek but to have expressed his fear that Dubcek would be unable to maintain effective control. This appraisal may be fairly close to the mark. For a Communist, Dubcek's views are probably relatively enlightened, but from a Soviet point of view his instincts may still seem essentially sound. That is to say, Dubcek surely has no desire to turn Czechoslovakia over to non-Communists and certainly wants to be on friendly terms with Moscow. But even if Soviet threats or Soviet deeds convince Dubcek, they might only infuriate the Czech liberals, whose ability to remove Dubcek from office cannot be wholly discounted.

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Soviet Options

8. The Soviets could move against Czechoslovakia in roughly four areas: politically, through open polemics and propaganda, international conferences, diplomatic pressures, etc.; economically, through slowdowns and interruptions of deliveries (of, for example, such vitally important commodities as wheat and oil) or even a total break in economic relations; clandestinely, principally through pro-Soviet or conservative elements in the Czech party; and militarily, through pressures -- e.g. Warsaw Pact and Soviet troop movements -- or through direct intervention, probably in response to a trumped-up or even genuine Czech invitation.

9. Even before Dubcek took off for his meetings in Moscow there were signs that the Soviets were cranking up to move in a number of the areas listed above. Polemics, for example, had already begun. The Soviet press had started to issue warnings, some of them only indirectly critical and cast in ideological terms -- defending, among other things, the dictatorship of the proletariat as the highest form of democracy -- others fairly

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direct, admonitory, and even explicitly critical of the positions of liberals in the Czech party. For its part, the Czech press -- in addition to raising the question of Soviet involvement in the Masaryk affair and in the Slansky trial -- had begun to sound the alarm over Soviet attitudes and intentions, inter alia scoring the Soviets for "measuring new phenomena with an old yardstick" and raising again the spectre of "imperialist" subversion.

10. The state of Soviet-Czechoslovak economic relations is more confused. Rumors that the Soviets have already played games with wheat deliveries and hard-currency loans have yet to be fully confirmed or denied; both sides may be putting out tendentious statements on these matters. Soviet reluctance to rescue the hard-pressed Czech economy is, however, fairly obvious and easily understandable.

11. Indications that the Soviets have been tempted to resort to clandestine efforts to re-establish influence over the Czech party are as yet very indirect, consisting chiefly of signs that Moscow remains in touch with Czech conservatives, including Novotny, and guesses that anti-Dubcek pamphlets now appearing in Prague and in Czech factories were at least in part Soviet-inspired.

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12. It is in the military area that the portents are most ominous. Soviet concern over the Czech attitude toward the Warsaw Pact is a matter of public record. The question of joint maneuvers in Czechoslovakia has been raised and answered, equivocally. Dubcek said after his Moscow visit that such maneuvers would of course be held; the Czech Defense Minister agreed but indicated that they would be command post exercises not involving the presence of any substantial number of Soviet troops. In addition to such open commentary, there are reports that Marshal Yakubovsky, commander of Pact forces who stopped in Prague during a recent swing through Eastern Europe, asked the Czechs to allow the stationing on Czech soil of Soviet or perhaps other Pact forces.* And there is another report --

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* These reports probably should not be dismissed out of hand. It is in principle the same kind of idea the Soviets advanced a few years ago when they suggested that elements of the so-called northern tier forces (i.e. those from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany) be stationed on one another's territory. (The proposal was turned down at the time, apparently in part because Warsaw found the notion of German troops returning to Poland simply too abhorrent.) The point is that the Soviets have flirted with this kind of scheme for some time. Resurrecting it now, as a means to intimidate the Czechs, is not too startling a thought. Using Yakubovsky, a blunt, even crude soldier to convey the message, through a fellow soldier and Hero of the Soviet Union, President Svoboda, though perhaps a clumsy way of doing things, makes a certain amount of sense too.

via a Czech source of Le Monde -- that General Yepishev, the top Soviet political officer, told the CPSU Central Committee in late April that Soviet forces are ready to intervene in Czechoslovakia if "faithful" Communists there asked for help.

Soviet Politics

13. A variety of reports that Czech developments are responsible for growing political difficulties in Moscow seem entirely plausible. Unsuccessful Soviet efforts to keep Novotny in power, presumably masterminded by Brezhnev with the active concurrence of Kosygin and Podgorny, open the Triumvirate to charges of bumbling or worse. The equivocal results of the Dresden conference in March and the subsequent hands-off policies of the leadership, together with the continued progress of the Czech liberalization movement, also expose the Triumvirate to charges of having underrated the dangers of Czech "revisionism" after Novotny was tossed out. In other words, from the perspective of party and military stalwarts in Moscow who are especially alarmed about what might happen in Czechoslovakia and who, in any case, might be delighted to have a pretext for criticizing the policies of the Triumvirate, the top leadership may look both bad and vulnerable.

14. There is not very much precedent to go on here, but two incidents from the past may be worth mentioning. The last international crisis the USSR went through, the June War, occasioned strong and open criticism of the top leadership in the Central Committee. (This was the Yegorychev affair.) And when, in the fall of 1956, the Soviets faced the sudden prospect of losing major client states in Eastern Europe, the problem led to considerable controversy within the leadership, and the Soviet military seemed at the time especially anxious to clamp down hard -- Marshal Zhukov wanted to "crush" the Poles "like flies".

Conclusion

15. There are compelling reasons for the Soviets to want to try to arrest or reverse the trend of events in Czechoslovakia. To Brezhnev and company, the risks of inaction may be twofold: loss of position at home and loss of Czechoslovakia -- and eventually others -- abroad. To be sure, if this is indeed the Soviet mood of the moment, there are also good reasons why Moscow would hope to be able to avoid drastic measures. Political

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action and threats of something more severe would thus appear to be the best bet. But to make such action and threats credible, to impress Dubcek and the Czechs with the dangers of continued heresy and the strength of Soviet purpose, Moscow may have decided that bold moves are in order -- presumably on a rising scale -- and that ultimately even military intervention may be necessary.

16. In this connection, we repeat the conclusion of one of our previous memoranda:*

> The question of the continuation of Communist rule ... may be the key one in Moscow. Conceivably, the Soviet leaders could come to feel that the Bloc, qua Bloc, was not all that vital. As, in fact, they have learned to live with a truly independent socialist Yugoslavia, so too they could bring themselves to try to get along with an equally independent socialist Czechoslovakia. But the collapse of Communist control in any of the Bloc countries would damage the USSR's prestige, embarrass its ideology, and threaten its vital interests (including even the security of its frontiers). It could lead to chaos and counter-revolution, tempt similar developments in other Bloc states (e.g. most ominously for the Soviets in East Germany), and even invite Western involvement. The stakes would thus seem extraordinarily high and the hazards of inaction extremely grave. Unless, as seems most unlikely, the Soviets concluded that their moves would be actively and forcibly

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* ONE Special Memorandum No. 6-68, "The USSR and Eastern Europe", 21 March 1968, SECRET.

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opposed by the West, they would probably believe that the disadvantages of intervention -- by no means inconsiderable -- would simply have to be suffered. This certainly was their conclusion in 1956 and though they now have more to lose than they did then, its message seems apropos even today.

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